

Belfast mired in racist shame as thugs force Romanians to flee their homes

David Sharrock Ireland Correspondent

More than 100 Romanians were moved to emergency accommodation in Belfast last night after a racist gang attacked homes in the university area of the city. One of the attackers was said to be brandishing a gun.

The immigrants had to be moved after a campaign of violence and extreme racist abuse. Maria Fechete, whose command of English has made her the group's unofficial spokeswoman, said: "I have not slept in a week. We have just had enough." Three homes were attacked nine times over three days last week.

Couaccusil Filuis said that the thugs had threatened to kill children. "They made signs like they wanted to cut my brother's baby's throat. They said they wanted to kill us," he said.

A man who gave his name as Deaglaz showed a stitched wound on his abdomen that he said had been caused by broken glass after the windows were smashed in his house. "Ten persons, they drink, they no good, they broke in the house," he said.

The intimidation culminated in an attack on a rally being held in support of the Eastern European migrants on Monday night, in which thugs threw bricks and bottles and made Nazi salutes, chanting slogans associated with Combat 18, a far-right faction.

On the boarded-up windows of one

of the Belfast houses from which the 130 Romanians were forced to flee yesterday was a poster: "Village residents say no to racist attacks". It did not last long. A woman was seen ripping it down as she walked down Belgravia Avenue, on the edge of the loyalist district known as The Village.

The immigrants, of Roma origin, say that they want to go home rather than stay in Northern Ireland any longer.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland faced criticism over its response to the racist attacks, with officers rejecting claims that they had been slow to answer 999 calls.

The Prime Minister joined Stormont ministers in condemning the attacks. Martin McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister, said that they were the work of a "tiny unrepresentative minority of racist criminals".

Mihai Delcea, the Romanian consul-general, is to meet the Province's Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie, today.

The location of the families' temporary shelter is being kept secret and they are under police protection.

Superintendent Chris Noble spoke in defence of the police action and dampened speculation that loyalist paramilitaries might have been behind the attacks. "The information that I have at the moment is that there is no co-ordination, there is no authorisation



The families say that the attackers have threatened to kill their children

by any other groups," he said. "It's a number of individuals who have taken some form of umbrage for whatever reason to people living in the community and are contributing to the community."

The area of South Belfast from which most of the Roma families were forced after being threatened and assaulted is not a working-class Protestant one. Belgravia Avenue runs off the Lisburn Road, which locals call the Knightsbridge of Belfast because of its fashion boutiques and coffee shops full of affluent young mothers. There are Polish grocery shops and ethnic

restaurants. Close to Queen's University, many of the handsome red-brick terraced houses are home to students.

As the city's most cosmopolitan district it can be proud of electing Europe's only Chinese-born politician, Anna Lo, of the cross-community Alliance Party.

Ms Lo arrived in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and remembers being kicked and racially insulted in Belfast city centre by gleeful teenagers.

She said that attacks on the Roma homes had been increasing in frequency in recent months. "They are really very frightened. The women, when they were talking to me yesterday, they were really upset, tears in their eyes and said, 'You know we love it here, we'd like to live here, but we're too scared.'"

She said that the police had not responded to 999 calls made by the families and that a man brandishing a handgun had warned them that they would be shot if they did not leave.

In March some Poles were forced out of their homes in The Village after a Northern Ireland football match against Poland at Windsor Park.

The Roma, of whom there are 200 in Belfast according to the Romanian Embassy in London, have recently been subjected to attacks in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Italy, according to Neil Jarman of the Institute for Conflict Research.



About 130 Romanians were taken to